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## MARIA MIES, SILVIA FEDERICI, AND BIOPOWER

BIOPOLITICS BIOPOLITIK POSTMODERNER KÖRPER, BIOPOWER, ECOFEMINISM, FEDERICI, FEMINISM, FOUCAULT, MARXISM, PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

In the 1970s, activists and intellectuals developed new modes of inquiry for understanding the administration, control, and punishment of human bodies, and the constitutive effects that these techniques had on our means of apprehending ourselves and communicating with others. While Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics is a particularly celebrated example, his innovations occurred in parallel with another endeavor, initiated independently of him: The practical and theoretical efforts of autonomist feminists, first in Italy. Beginning with a new approach to the study of domestic labor and the nature of the value that it produces, these thinkers developed increasingly far-reaching approaches to problems of racism, colonial and post-colonial subjugation, and ecological despoliation, as well as the subordination of women. Anticipating a series of other developments in feminism and queer theory, the autonomist feminists – Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Maria Mies, and Silvia Federici, among others – developed sophisticated formulations of compulsory heterosexuality, sexual commodification, rape culture, and the reciprocal bonds between class and gender. Moreover, the structural and even totalizing approach that these authors produced has a great deal to offer us today, because it carefully elaborates a common horizon of struggle on which solidarity can be built.

### Federici's Critique of Foucault

Foucault's work in the 1970s, beginning with *Discipline and Punish* and the lectures that preceded it, *Psychiatric Power*, initiates a distinct and influential research program. Raising the question of the management and control of life processes, by an array of strategies of power and knowledge, he demonstrates a fine-tuned and sensitive method for uncovering and registering the process that produce subjects. Each of these subjects, among other attributes, are allocated a particular sexuality that is reciprocally produced and incited by institutions, as well as individual and collective resistances to these modes of control. However, commentators have identified certain blind spots in his approach. For example, while sexuality is a topic of inquiry for him, he is largely inattentive to the specifics of gender. Further, his account can seem to imply a kind of fixity that some readers find paralyzing; the lack of an outside to power and knowledge makes resistance a concomitant element of control, and it can be difficult to determine the possibilities of struggle for a more just world, on the basis of Foucault's analysis.

Foucault initially developed his insight under the name "biopower." Biopower is the name for the administration of "man in so far

as he is a living being"; for example, rather than fundamental concern with beliefs, taxation, public participation, technological development, or class domination, the state begins to see a fundamental interest as controlling birthrates and identifying potential illnesses ("Society Must Be Defended" 240). Biopower is intrinsically an interaction between state policy and the conditions of human life. In his later work, Foucault declares that in the modern period, the human being had transformed from "a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence" to "an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (History of Sexuality 143). This radicalization of the approach to biopower marks an inversion of priority, according to which life is not a prior given that must be managed, but rather that political techniques have priority over biological processes themselves. Subsequently, a substantial literature has developed, devoted to questions of analyses of the biopolitics of the contemporary period, as well as its genealogy.

In a footnote to *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes that while he has chosen particular examples in order to illustrate biopolitics, others "might have been taken from colonization, slavery and child rearing" (314). It is not clear whether he feels that these phenomena simply obey the same principles that he has demonstrated in his own studies, or whether they would require entirely new concepts and modes of inquiry. I suggest that autonomist feminists, independently of Foucault, contributed a biopolitical study of reproductive labor (including child rearing) that also serves to illuminate the relations of power and domination that undergird colonization. In other words, these authors might be read as a long elaboration and contestation of this footnote, to the degree that their own studies might pre-empt Foucault's, as descriptions of the most salient forms of biopower.

In the introduction to her groundbreaking study of 2004, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici makes a number of trenchant criticisms of Foucault. While strongly indebted to his understanding of biopolitics, Federici confronts it with insights from the Marxist, feminist, and decolonizing traditions (12). Federici argues, first, that the feminist tradition had already developed a study of biopolitics *avant la lettre* (15). Further, Federici emphasizes the continuing brutality of the treatment of women and racialized populations. While Foucault certainly viewed biopolitics as including the possibility of state-administered harm and death, he argues that the modern period was generally marked by a decline in direct assaults on the body. He believed that modern society had transitioned from one that focused on sanguinity (breeding and physical vulnerability) to a period in which it prioritized sexuality (desires as carrying psychological weight beyond their physical enactment) (History of Sexuality I, 150).

Federici argues that Foucault's claim that physical violence declined as a mode of control is only an effect of a relatively myopic point of view; in making this claim, he neglects the brutal violence meted out to women and to the targets of racism (16). As a profound historical figure for this other side of modernity, Federici draws attention especially to the witch trials as a necessary development in clearing the ground for capital accumulation (163-218). This account complements and extends work that has been done on slavery and colonization as crucial rather than secondary elements of capitalist society. Further, she ties the process of control, punishment, violation and execution of women's bodies to colonial means of domination and imposition of capitalist productive forces (133-162). Drawing on Karl Marx's insights, Federici develops the concept of primitive accumulation as the name for these violent, coercive and scarifying practices, the ensemble of which have given us modernity.

### **Marx's Primitive Accumulation**

Marx develops the concept of primitive accumulation in the final chapters of the first volume of *Capital*, and the notebooks entitled "Precapitalist Economic Formations" in the *Grundrisse* (Read 20). The idea develops from a basic problem; as Jason Read summarizes it,

To accumulate capital it is necessary to possess capital. There must then be an original or previous accumulation, one that is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but rather its point of departure and that constitutes the originary differentiation between capital and workers (21).

Marx argues that there is a conventional moral explanation—some people save while others squander—but this is an ahistorical myth. In his description, capitalism requires contact between two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production means of subsistence, who are eager to valorize the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labor-power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of 'their' own labor-power, and therefore the sellers of labor (Marx 874).

Rather than human nature, the development of capitalism rests on an artificial construction of social relations. In order to produce this new relation of production, Marx argues that capitalism must enact the "extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production" (273). By this means, capitalism begins in violence rather than free association. Further, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that "The propertyless are more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars than workers" (notebook VII). For this reason, dispossession must be followed by penalization; a whole set of coercive measures must continually be exerted so that the population will form a pliable working class. While Marx sometimes presents primitive accumulation as relegated to the distant past, he also links it to ongoing processes of colonization. For this reason, many Marxists argue that primitive accumulation is an ongoing feature of capitalist modernity. Certain contemporary autonomists have come to view the process of primitive accumulation broadly as a series of processes and strategies that produce a specific type of contemporary subject, capable of producing and consuming, and fitted with a variety of fears and hopes.

Read, then, defines contemporary primitive accumulation as "the manner in which a mode of production is constitutive and

constituted by desires, forms of living, and intentions: subjectivity" (26). From a traditional perspective, the theory of biopolitics is somewhat at odds with Marxist analysis, because Marx's thesis is that capitalist society is fundamentally engineered to produce surplus value; administration of life processes is secondary to this economic goal. However, when primitive accumulation describes all of the processes of disciplining human potential and action for the most efficient exploitation by capital, it begins to function as another name for the biopolitics described by Foucault.

Federici developed a feminist approach to primitive accumulation that draws on Marx's and Foucault's descriptions as well as criticizing them. According to Federici, primitive accumulation does not create the proletariat as a homogeneous whole; rather, it also introduces various racialized and gendered hierarchies (63-64). These instrumentalized identities rests on procedures of disciplining the body; she says, "the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism" (146). In her description, primitive accumulation includes "the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers" (12). Federici also argues that a fundamental violence remains an ongoing part of the process, according to which force, pain and death are necessary in order to eliminate non-productive elements of the populace. These insights draw on a serious of prior studies produced in the autonomist-feminist tradition, including the work of a German author, Maria Mies.

### **Mies' Global Primitive Accumulation and Ecofeminism**

*Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, written by Maria Mies in 1986, builds on the perspectives of Italian autonomist feminists while introducing a series of significant departures and implicit challenges. Unlike her predecessors, who emerged from the Italian struggles during the "Years of Lead," Mies is a German scholar and activist whose formative work was conducted in India. While the redefinition of reproductive labor is fundamental to her effort, Mies develops a global and historical approach that aims to completely re-characterize capitalism itself. By investigating anthropological data, she establishes a perspective closer to radical feminism; while capital accumulation, in her view, is the fundamental cause of the exploitation of women, the beginnings of this process of accumulation are themselves bound to a masculine worldview and a pre-historical victory of men over women. Also, while her predecessors often argued that capitalism presents a new horizon of possibility as well as deepening and expanding exploitation, Mies rejects the positive dimension of capitalist growth. The Italian autonomists tended to view automation, as well as political struggle, as a necessary route to liberation from housework; in stark contrast, Mies rejects technological solutions and argues for a return to a subsistence perspective (220). While the Italians strenuously insisted on a purely working-class viewpoint, she argues that a global middle-class feminist movement is necessary in order to begin the social changes that could begin a real transformation (206). Last, while the Italians subscribed to a Marxist conception of revolution that would expropriate the bourgeoisie, Mies rejects violence as "mid-wife of history" and instead proposes a movement of consumer boycotts (5). While Mies draws on Marx's analyses, her perspective exits revolutionary Marxism, towards a feminist anarchism (37).

Mies argues that the contemporary world system depends on the "subordination and exploitation of women, nature and colonies" (2). All three of these forms of domination involve a seizure of the material body by a primarily male ruling class. Like Fortunati, Mies argues that women have a special position as objects of exploitation and potential subjects of struggle, because formal and informal social processes and practices intimately estrange their bodies from them (2). In her understanding, the history of the contemporary women's movement has typically taken "body politics" as the focal priority (24). The politics of personal emerged first from the struggle for abortion rights, then for sexual liberation and against domestic violence (25). Mies argues that it was only subsequently that feminism became understood as a primarily cultural movement; initially it was somatically rooted. She claims that the widespread adherence to a division between sex and gender in Anglophone feminism is a concession to this culturalist bias; in fact the body is fundamentally culturalized, and culture is a means of coding, constructing, and disciplining the body. Mies argues that an equality of exploitation for the two sexes is impossible in a capitalist society, even in the most technologically advanced societies, despite all of the efforts that have been made in this direction (21). For her, this is not only because of the need to divide the working class, or the instrumentalizing of maternity, but also the result of a fundamental estrangement from the body and its labor produced by a patriarchal capitalist worldview.

Mies views reproductive labor as the primary form of work in order to produce the conditions of life. As a result, her criticism of Marx is stronger than her predecessors; in her view, classical Marxism artificially separates work and nature in order to neglect woman's contribution, which it relegates to biological determinism (52). In fact, she entirely inverts Marx's priority for productive labor, regardless of whether the mode of production emphasizes use-value or exchange-value. Rather than viewing productive work as the main activity of humanity, Mies argues that this is secondary to the feminine effort to provide care labor. She argues that Marx's understanding of history, depending on the transformation of nature by labor, inherently accepts masculinist preconceptions.

Further, Mies argues that this event is not relegated to the past. Rather, an ongoing destruction and subordination of women is necessary to the continuing expansion and accumulation of capital. In doing so, she draws on dependency theory, such as the work of Samir Amin, André Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein. In addition, she writes about her personal research and commitments to the feminist movement in India (151-156). In her view, the practice of amniocentesis in order to accomplish sex-selective abortions is of a piece with domestic partner violence and the appalling increase in rapes. Mies argues that these cannot be considered as mere survivals or relics of the feudal past (157). Rather, they are motivated by social adherence to new

capitalist ideologies that devalue the labor of women. With regard to sexual assaults, Mies views this as an attempt to reinstate a patriarchal ideology of feminine self-sacrifice. It punishes women who leave the home, thereby forcing them to remain dependent and consumed with domestic responsibilities. Mies also discusses sex tourism as a profitable market from the commodification of the bodies of women in the periphery by men from central economies. In general, she argues that the contemporary world system propagates a "patriarchal, sexist and racist ideology of women which defines women basically as housewives and sex objects" (142). Further, she argues that these are not merely cultural prejudices but are economically inscribed in the financial, productive, and reproductive work that founds the world's political and economic institutions.

Mies argues that her perspective is not biologically determinist. Rather, through an investigation of anthropological data, she locates the origins of patriarchy in a transformation of labor according to which the instruments of work "are the hands and the head, but never the womb or the breast of a woman" (45). Women's gathering is the fundamental endeavor that maintains the community. As hunting becomes the primary activity of men, this initially secondary effort becomes central and displaces the significance of the home (58). The privilege of manual and intellectual labor over care work, she says, was enforced by the discovery of weapons by men who had become hunters and subsequently warriors (57-61). In her view, the beginnings of patriarchy are not rooted in biological difference or in a mode of production, but in fact are located in a particular type of tool and the possibility of its destructive use.

At this point, I think that some questions are raised by Mies' analysis and the way that it locates domination in the beginnings of techne and the possibility of aggressive use of that techne by the male sex. In a sense, Mies can appear to be developing a radical feminist version of the famous account of the beginnings of oppression by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Like Rousseau, she posits an initial human nature which is caring and good, and which is corrupted by the discovery of artifice. A number of commentators have analyzed critically the understanding of technology as a dangerous supplement, and in particular the compatibility of this claim with conventional, patriarchal modes of thought. While Mies argues that she is not denigrating all technology, and that women had their own tools in order to perform care labor, it is not clear how the development of technology could prevent contamination by its possible use as weaponry. For example, one might consider a surgical scalpel, which is a healing tool that depends on incision. It would seem that any technological advance could have potentially injurious effects, and that to eschew developments that carry the possibility of abuse would stifle the possibility of any type of human transformation mediated by the technological.

Further, Mies specifies that it was the production of a surplus of goods, as well as weaponry, that founded class society, partly facilitated by this technological advance (65). In advocating the return to a subsistence society and the rejection of not only arms but all luxuries as a feminist imperative, she risks, for example, further disenfranchising the disabled, who need or want the use of prostheses that go beyond the natural capacities of the body. Donna Haraway famously suggested a powerful counterpoint to Mies' view of femininity as natural and ascetic in her "Cyborg Manifesto" (149-182). In addition, the schema suggested by Mies seems to exclude the possibility of transgender life, or at least to reject its classification as feminine.

However, Mies' fundamental argument, that the technological advances concomitant with the accumulation of capital are themselves destructive to the ecological foundations of human life, is troubling and compelling. Her application of autonomist feminist ideas toward an ecofeminist outlook raises unavoidable questions. Mies writes,

[T]he whole world is now structured into one system of unequal distribution of labour under the dictates of capital accumulation [...] based on the social paradigm of the predatory hunter/warrior who, without himself producing, is able by means of arms to appropriate and subordinate other producers, their productive forces and their products (71).

It is necessary to maintain this critique of the violent and destructive aspects of the tendency of global society today, while avoiding a nostalgic or purist return to origins. Mies' project of an autarkic, self-sufficient economy seems unlikely to survive or to withdraw itself from a global economy, and she gives very tentative suggestions on how this could be achieved (220). The struggle against class domination, against the dispossession of pre-capitalist formation in colonial spaces, and against the annihilation of ecological fundamental, may need to take place along lines closer to those formulated by Dalla Costa and Fortunati; that is, as a struggle immanently produced by capital and the relations of production that it engenders, rather than by means of withdrawal.

Mies gave the name "primitive accumulation" to her studies of the seizure of women's bodies, colonial spaces, and nature by capitalist logic and practices (83). As discussed earlier in this essay, this newly emphasized concept from Marx became fundamental for the more recent analyses written by Federici. Dalla Costa, Fortunati and Mies never cite Foucault in their foundational works and do not use the term "biopolitics." However, Federici correctly notes that their emphases on reproductive labor and on "body politics" effectively develop a biopolitical analysis alongside Foucault's famous studies of psychiatry and prisons (15). Moreover, while Foucault became fascinated by neoliberalism in the later years of his life, the autonomist feminists maintain a much more oppositional perspective toward the economic and political structures of the contemporary world—because they view these conventions as fundamentally rooted in violence done to women.

#### **What Do the Autonomist Feminists Contribute to Feminism Today?**

Contemporary feminist theories have developed sensitivity to the multiplicity of experiences and struggles that characterize the contemporary world. Today, feminism and queer theory avoid essentialisms of experience on the basis purely of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, or class exploitation, and we endeavor to take into account the manner in which these factors inflect or transform one another. A biopolitical approach provides a further extension of this analytic perspective in understanding the means that subjects are produced, reproduced and disciplined. As Foucault formulated it, biopolitics is not primarily a question of lived experience; it is first a series of strategies formulated by elites. However, the power and knowledge that animates biopolitics always expects and is met by unpredictable forms of resistance practiced by individuals and groups. For this reason, it is potentially a theory of great practical value for oppressed people.

Attention to the biopolitics of gender and reproductive labor recorded by autonomist feminists can contribute a great deal to feminist and queer theory and practice. By combining an analysis of the Foucauldian type with Marxism and decolonization theory, the autonomist feminists developed a structural critique that locates the devaluation of women, their bodies, and their labor, as well as the violence exerted against them, in processes that have their own rationality and logic. Further, these thinkers are able to understand the mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality, as well as the ways that new forms of love and social relationships, seemingly escaping traditional values, can be recuperated by exploitive economic and political norms.

Mies and Federici do not begin with the individual, but rather with a political economy that is basically indifferent to moral imperatives. As a result, they are able to locate trauma and harm not only in oppressive cultural formations, but also in the necessity of exploitation that grounds economic development. The autonomist feminists practiced an innovative means of approaching violence and immiseration produced by states, institutions, and individuals that can appear abstract – locating these ills in the devaluation of reproductive labor. Abstraction, however, is conducive to producing new bonds of communality and shared experience, because it is one step removed from the immediacy of personal experience and more communicative as a result. Their criticism can also appear unusually totalizing, in that neo-colonialism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny are all traced back to the needs of capital and the states that administer it. However, this very tendency to locate common enemies has a positive outcome; it becomes the grounds for solidarity among all those who are administered and controlled by exploitive institutions, transactions, and relationships.

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